

THE AGE OF
BUREAUCRACY

*Perspectives on the Political
Sociology of Max Weber*

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II

The Champion of Nationalist Power Politics and Imperialism

Max Weber can be said to have been with some qualifications one of the few German liberals who were staunch supporters of parliamentary democracy in Germany long before the First World War. His violent criticism of the 'personal rule' of Wilhelm II and his bombastic and pretentious speeches which had helped so much to create an utterly negative image of Germany in the western world, was well known, and hence his points seemed to have been well taken. His forceful attacks on the Bismarckian Constitution and its shortcomings which were published in a series of widely read newspaper articles in the influential *Frankfurter Zeitung*, were still in the minds of those who could remember the years of the First World War, all the more so as Weber's advocacy of an immediate reform of the constitution in June 1917 had given a particular boost to the reform movement. Weber's passionate attempts to convince the German bourgeoisie in 1918-1919 that their duty was to join forces with the Social Democrats in a common endeavour to restore order and to establish a parliamentary democracy, had also made a lasting impact on public opinion. His eloquent campaign for a president directly elected by the people even found realization in the Weimar Constitution. Although this was in fact due to a variety of coinciding factors—above all the fear of the bourgeoisie parties that an all-powerful parliament would be a dangerous weapon in the hands of the Socialists—a great many people gave Weber the credit for the introduction of a popular presidency, thereby overrating the role he actually played. All these instances became part of the image of Max Weber, as it emerged after his sudden death on 14th June 1920.

Among the 'Weber circle' around Marianne Weber (its most prominent members were Karl Jaspers, Karl Löwenstein, Melchior Palyi, and Eduard Baumgarten who was, however, at that time still a student) there emerged the idea that Max Weber had been a potential political leader of the German nation at one of the most depressing junctures of its history, but that his services had not been accepted. In other words, that the professional politicians of the day had refused Max Weber the chance to exert the influence and to exercise the power which he as a born political and intellectual genius ought to have been given.¹ This legend circulated particularly among German intellectuals, and it seems to have had a lasting influence, the more so as many people were agreed upon one point: that the failure of the Weimar Republic had been due primarily to the lack of first-rate political leaders.

In the decade after 1945, the political and intellectual climate in Germany was largely moulded by a renaissance of the political and cultural traditions of the Weimar period. Many leading politicians and intellectuals of the twenties now rose once again to major positions in German public life. The recourse to Weimar and to democratic strands in the German traditions before 1918, helped gradually to re-establish some degree of political self-confidence among the German people, after it had been utterly shaken by the fearful news of what had been done to the world, in the name of the German nation, during the reign of the National Socialism. It was only too natural that in such a situation Max Weber once more came to be considered one of the 'forefathers' of German democracy. Neither Jacob Peter Mayer's *Max Weber and German Politics*—a book written during the Second World War, in which Weber was described as a 'new

¹ Cf. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild*, Heidelberg, 1950, 2 ed. (henceforth referred to as *Lebensbild*), p. 694: 'Die Nation hatte keine Verwendung für ihn in einem Augenblick, wo jedermann nach Führern rief.' Karl Jaspers, *Max Weber. Politiker, Forscher, Philosoph*, München, 1958, 2 ed., pp. 32ff., deals at length with 'die verlorene Möglichkeit der Führerschaft Max Webers'. See also the obituaries by Ernst Troeltsch, Gertrud Bäumer, Gerhart von Schulze-Gävernitz, Karl Löwenstein, and others, in *Max Weber zum Gedächtnis*, Sonderheft 7 der *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, ed. René König and Johannes Winckelmann, Köln, 1963.

machiavellist' who had to bear part of the responsibility for the disastrous course of recent German history—nor Gerth's and Mills's mildly critical, liberal assessment of Max Weber's political thought were accorded much attention.² Against this background any critical analysis of Weber's political views and his part in Wilhelmian politics was bound to cause considerable repercussions. The older generation was satisfied to see Max Weber in the perspective which had already been built up in the twenties. His well-argued criticism of Wilhelmian Germany and Wilhelmian society seemed to them a good point of departure for a re-assessment of Germany's more recent history. For the younger generation of Germans who were up to a point successfully 're-educated' after the war by the educational policy of the American and British occupation administrations along the lines of a modernized philosophy of natural rights, it was somewhat more difficult to follow this path. The disaster of National Socialism was still vividly in their minds, and this made them inspect more carefully even those ideological positions which had hitherto passed as being more or less democratic. The author's book *Max Weber und die Deutsche Politik* which was written in 1958, was clearly influenced by this intellectual climate. Even the most superficial inspection of Weber's various political writings was after all bound to reveal not only his criticism of Wilhelmian Germany and his advocacy of a parliamentary system, but also his passionate, even violent nationalism, as well as his strong emphasis on the necessity of power politics, attitudes which would seem to belong to the cherished traditions of German politics which the Germans now boasted of having overcome once and for all. Under the given conditions, however, any exposure of these features in Weber's political thought was bound to produce strong reactions, since it violated the taboo under which the recent past had been put by the older generation, after the traumatic experience of the Weimar Republic and the reign of Hitler. The discussion which developed may best be summed up in the

² Jacob Peter Mayer, *Max Weber and German Politics. A Study in Political Sociology*, London, 1956, 2 ed., pp. 117f. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, London, 1970, 7 ed. (henceforth referred to as Gerth).

words of Raymond Aron: 'This re-interpretation of Weberian politics caused an outrage because it robbed the new German democracy of a "founding father", a glorious ancestor, a spokesman of genius.'³

Initially this appeared to be more-or-less part and parcel of *les querelles allemandes*, but it soon became obvious that more was at stake. It goes without saying that it is difficult to mark a clear boundary between Weber's scholarly achievements in sociology and in political theory, and his political convictions. Max Weber, of course, did his utmost to keep politics and scholarship apart, and he took pains not to plunge into superficial 'value judgements' more or less thinly veiled in a scientific language. Yet it would be misleading, and ultimately abortive if one were to take this as a starting point for a strategy of immunization of Weber's sociological achievements, as has sometimes been suggested. There is in fact a fairly intimate connexion between Weber's scholarly work and his political creed; in a way they are even two sides of the same coin. Weber's scholarly work has certainly been substantially stimulated by political considerations of a very fundamental nature.

In view of this, it seems worth attempting an assessment of Weber's attitudes and thoughts about nationalism and imperialism. In doing so, Weber's actual role in the politics of his time, and his theoretical views on the issues of nationalism and imperialism, have to be given equal consideration.

Max Weber was brought up in an intellectual climate which largely bore the imprint of German National Liberalism. Even though Weber began to question some of the basic premises of this political creed quite early in his life, he undoubtedly took up a nationalistic attitude which was very similar to that of the bulk of the National Liberals in the 1880s and 1890s. When Weber declared it to be a first principle that the enhancement of the power and prestige of the German nation state must be the fundamental guide line of all politics, he did not differ markedly from the position of a great majority of the German middle classes. It must be realised that Weber was, as much as most of

³ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, Vol. 2, New York, 1967, p. 248.

his contemporaries, subjected to the over-riding influences of an age dominated by the ideology of nationalism and the prestigious idea of the nation state.

What appears to make Weber outstanding among his contemporaries is not that he was less nationalistic than others, but that he publicly propagated fairly early in his career the principle of the 'primacy of the interests of the nation state' with regard to all spheres of social and political life, refusing to make comfortable compromises even with the best of reasons or excuses. For this very reason he can in a specific sense be called a rational nationalist—in as much as he declared the national idea to be a kind of ultimate value which had to come first in politics and economics alike. Max Weber attempted to subject his whole political as well as his intellectual and scholarly activities to this principle, and he did so with the utmost rigour. This very fact perhaps explains why he at times appears to be a sort of hard-headed nationalist. In principle, at least, Max Weber adhered to 'the primacy of the interests of the nation state' to the end of his life, with a stubbornness that, at first sight, is somewhat difficult to reconcile with his scholarly findings about the nature of modern nationalism and imperialism.

It is in the context of Weber's studies of the social conditions of the farm labourers in the eastern provinces of Prussia—which he embarked upon in 1891 on behalf of the *Verein für Socialpolitik*—that the issue of nationalism enters his scholarly work for the first time.⁴ The issues involved had in fact an important nationalistic dimension. Since 1884 the Germans, or at any rate the National Liberals, had shown considerable concern about what seemed to them the gradual 'Polonization' of the East

⁴ For the following sections see W. J. Mommsen, *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik, 1890-1920*, Tübingen, 1959 (henceforth referred to as Mommsen, *Max Weber*), pp. 23ff. Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber, An Intellectual Portrait*, New York, 1960 (henceforth referred to as Bendix), pp. 38ff. and—although her presentation is rather erratic, containing a curious mixture of quotations from the most diverse sources—Ilse Dronberger, *The Political Thought of Max Weber. In Quest of Statesmanship*, New York, 1971, pp. 116f. A short survey of Weber's political views is given by Anthony Giddens, *Politics and Sociology in the Thought of Max Weber*, London, 1972, which irons out somewhat the tensions and contradictions in Weber's political thought.

Elbian provinces of Prussia—as more and more German farm labourers were migrating to the west, and in turn more and more Polish workers, mostly from Galicia, were moving in and, although this was made more difficult for them by Government regulations, they were settling down in these areas in substantial numbers. The research project which Weber joined, had been launched by the *Verein für Socialpolitik* in order to find suitable legislative measures for keeping the German farm labourers on the land and hence for preventing the immigration of more Poles.

Max Weber explored the problems involved thoroughly. He vividly described the fairly desperate social conditions of the farm labourers in the East Elbian areas drawing from extensive empirical material, collected by techniques of empirical research which were considered to be almost revolutionary at the time. Yet he was not content simply to draw up some legislative proposals which might help improve the living conditions of the German-born farm labourers in the respective areas. Rather, he concluded, there was no point at all in trying to improve their lot by means of social policies, since the causes of the migration of the German farm labourers to the west were much more fundamental. Weber described them as follows:

Firstly, the steady advance of capitalist methods of production in the East which resulted in the disruption of the time-honoured patriarchal ties between the landlord and his farm-hands.

Secondly, together with the former, the irrational desire of the farm labourers to be 'free'.

Thirdly, the inescapable fact that the Prussian Junkers were, for over-riding economic reasons, not in a position to raise the living conditions of the farm labourers to such a level as to put an end to the 'flight from the countryside'. Under the given conditions—that is to say, under the economic pressure of the competition of the overseas grain producers on the German market (1894 was the peak of the European agrarian crisis) the landlords were, in Weber's opinion, bound to employ cheap Polish seasonal workers rather than German labourers in order to survive economically, as the subsistence wages of Polish workers were well below of that of their more fortunate German colleagues.

In analysing these results Weber was guided by the principle of the preservation, and as far as possible, the strengthening, of the German nationality in the eastern provinces of Prussia. It goes without saying that this principle carried, in his opinion, over-riding weight. He thus arrived at conclusions which seemed all too logical, however radical they appeared to a great many people at the time. Weber suggested as practical measures: first, the closure of the Eastern frontiers of Germany to all seasonal labour as well as the prohibition of any further immigration of Polish people, and secondly, the repartitioning of the huge estates in the east, and their gradual replacement by small farms which, with regard to the labour force employed would be largely self-sufficient, and which would not produce for the market to a substantial degree. Weber pointed out that this would necessarily mean a considerable reduction of output of agrarian products. Yet, in his opinion, the German national interest did not at all require a further increase of agrarian production, but rather the preservation of the 'ethnic' landscape, as one would put it nowadays.

The political implications of these proposals were far-reaching indeed. They were based on the following line of reasoning: if one wished to preserve the German nation-state as an ethnically homogeneous unit—that is to say, in this specific case, to keep the Poles out—the agriculture in the east had to be organized contrary to the economic principle of maximization of productivity and output. The vested interests of the Junker nobility, whose social traditions were tied up with a style of living which was possible only on huge estates in the countryside, likewise had to give way to the national interest.

This argument, namely, that all other considerations and vested interests had to give way to the over-riding interest of the preservation and indeed the enhancement of the nation state, was chosen by Max Weber as the central topic of his famous 'Inaugural Lecture' at Freiburg in 1895.⁵ Here he did his best to make crystal clear that the interests of the nation-state ought to have absolute priority over all other considerations; not only

⁵ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winkelmann, 1971, 3 ed. (henceforth referred to as *PS*), pp. 1ff.

in practical politics, but also in those scholarly disciplines which took an active part in the actual processes of legislation and political decision-making. He considered it to be merely logical that a scholarly discipline, which called itself *Volkswirtschaftspolitik* was bound to accept the interest of the nation-state as the only legitimate yardstick for matters of social and economic policy or for social and welfare legislation. Weber's famous argument that science is not supposed to deduce ultimate values from its findings which might be useful for orientation in research as well as in ordinary life—and is indeed incapable of doing so—is driven home in forceful language. Yet in this context it was meant explicitly to clear the way for the unrestricted application of the principle of the 'reason of state' as an ultimate guide line for all scholarly work, at least in all those disciplines, which were expected to give expert advice to politicians as well as to the public at large.

Weber's plea for this radical standpoint was couched in a language which already shocked his contemporaries. He himself was almost pleased to learn about the irritation which his 'Inaugural Lecture' had evoked in his audience. It was indeed full of phrases which display a militant nationalism, blended with Social Darwinist and to some extent even racialist notions. Weber's contention that the Poles were an inferior race, at least in so far as they stood on a considerably lower cultural level, compared with the Germans, makes somewhat strange reading nowadays, even if we make allowance for the fact that Weber attributed this more to economic and social backwardness, than to any intrinsic racial qualities of the Polish people.

The core of Weber's reasoning was that social life was essentially 'a struggle of man against man', which became even more tense under the socio-economic conditions created by the emerging capitalist system. Weber vigorously argued that no one should deceive himself as to the fundamental fact that social life, and in particular the destinies of national cultures, depend largely on the use of power, in one way or another. It was, in his opinion, futile to assume, that a social and political order could be devised in which recourse to force would become less and less necessary, in particular with regard to economic life: 'There is no peace in

the economic struggle for survival either: only those who take this delusion of peace for reality can possibly assume that the future will bring peace and enjoyment of life to our descendants.⁶ Weber was firmly convinced that the future harboured even more intense strife between the nations of the world, on the political level as well as in the sphere of economic competition on the world markets: 'The gloomy threat of the population problem as such, to leave everything else aside, is reason enough to prevent us from holding eudemonic views, and from assuming that there might be peace and happiness on the knees of the gods, or from thinking that there might be any other way than the fierce struggle of man against man, if the necessary elbow room is to be attained.'⁷

These words remind us of the gloomy messages of Jewish prophets, who painted a black future of their own people in order to instigate them to follow the thorny path assigned to them by God. Weber warned the German people to be on their guard, even if only purely economic issues were at stake: 'Economic competition is just another sort of struggle of nations with one another, and fighting for the preservation of our own national culture is under these conditions actually not made easier, but more difficult because material interests are being invoked inside the nation herself that tend to work against her future.'⁸ Weber rounded this argument off with rather cryptic remarks about the future of mankind. 'It is not peace and happiness that we shall have to hand over to our descendants, but rather the principle of eternal struggle for the survival and the higher breeding [*Emporzüchtung*] of our national species.'⁹

These rather harsh statements were, without doubt, somewhat influenced by the New Nationalism which had developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and which drew heavily from both Social Darwinism, and a somewhat refined racialist interpretation of German national culture.¹⁰ It should be pointed out, however, that very soon afterwards Max Weber emancipated

⁶ *PS*, p. 12 (author's trans.).

⁸ *PS*, p. 14 (author's trans.).

¹⁰ For the latter see Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, New York, 1961.

⁷ *Ibid.* (author's trans.).

⁹ *Ibid.* (author's trans.).

himself definitively from all sorts of racialist notions of this kind, and that he later on passionately dissociated himself from all racialist versions of nationalist thinking. Yet throughout his life he adhered to the conclusion which he had already arrived at in the late 1890s, namely that great nations are obliged to preserve their sphere of influence and their national culture, if necessary by means of force.

Max Weber was convinced that, in an age of imperialism and unrestricted international economic competition, the German nation state simply had to embark upon expansionist policies overseas. This he believed to be not only necessary but also the logical fulfilment of the political course of the German people which had been initiated by the foundation of the *Reich*. Weber insisted that Germany must carry on along the path entered upon in 1871, by raising herself from a European to a World Power: 'We ought to realize that the unification of Germany was little else than a piece of folly which was committed by the nation in her old days, and which, in view of its costly nature, rather ought not to have been embarked upon at all, if this was supposed to be the end and not the initial stage of Germany's striving for the status of a World Power.'¹¹ Weber's staunch championship of a vigorous German *Weltpolitik* was hailed with enthusiasm by his contemporaries and his message was taken up literally by a number of very influential journalists, Hans Delbrück and Friedrich Naumann prominent among them. Weber's bold move may be considered as a decisive step towards making imperialism in Germany a fashionable attitude amongst the middle classes, in particular amongst the intelligentsia.

In the late 1890s Max Weber acted on various occasions as a spokesman of a strong imperialist policy. He declared a successful expansion, among other things, to be a necessary pre-condition for the upkeep of the high living standards of the masses of the population. He argued that for this very reason the working classes ought to rally behind a strong expansionist policy overseas. Weber even joined the Pan-German League, and lectured at some local meetings, largely on the Polish question. He left it

¹¹ *PS*, p. 23 (author's trans.).

again when he discovered that even the 'Pan-Germans' were not willing to take a clear-cut stand against the Junker interests as regards Polish seasonal labour. In 1897 Weber also spoke up in favour of the construction of a German battle fleet: 'only people who are altogether coddled in respect to political affairs and who are naïve optimists will fail to recognize that the inevitable drive to expand economically which is common to all civilized nations organized on *bourgeois* lines after a transitional period of formally peaceful competition, is again approaching a point where it will be *power only* which decides the size of the share of the individual nations concerned in the economic control of the globe, this being identical with the margin of facilities for the livelihood of their population, in particular their working classes'.¹² Weber propagated the necessity of German expansion vigorously and with stringent arguments. At the same time he stated over and over again that such a policy could only be pursued with any chance of success, if it could count on the support of the nation at large. In order to achieve this he considered the first essentials to be a thoroughgoing liberalization, and at least a partial democratization of the German political system. The predominance of the Junkers in state and society alike could not, in Weber's opinion, be reconciled with an ambitious policy overseas. Nor was the bureaucratic system by which Germany was administered at the time capable of producing adequate political leaders who might succeed in rallying the nation behind such a policy. In this respect Weber referred time and again to the British example; he pointed out that in the British case a free people had succeeded in acquiring a huge Empire, and not a few indigenous peoples had succumbed voluntarily, rather than by force, to the British sway. Weber was a prominent representative of what has been called 'Liberal Imperialism', although in some respects he was rather more radical than the majority of the Liberal Imperialists in Germany at the time, both in foreign politics and in domestic affairs.

In principle Max Weber remained faithful to this position throughout his life, even in 1918, when he admitted with grief that Germany's role as a world power had definitely come to an

¹² *PS*, p. 30 (author's trans.).

end. Yet after the first years of the twentieth century Weber gradually modified his initial attitude. He became more aware of realities and took a more elastic line, not simply advocating recourse to force as he had done in most of his youthful statements on the issue of Imperialism. Indeed, he soon became a sharp critic of the kind of shallow nationalism which excelled in bombastic words, and thought only in terms of power and brute force, while it was devoid of any cultural substance. Weber for one would have none of the 'zoological nationalism', as he put it, that was cultivated at some German universities, as well as in the Pan-German League and other societies of that kind devoted to political agitation.¹³

This can be shown by Weber's attitude towards the Poles. He, who had once claimed that it was only the German people who 'transformed the Poles into human beings', now gradually came to their assistance. He strongly criticized the 'Bill concerning political associations' (which passed through the Reichstag in 1908 only after considerable wire-pulling behind the scenes) in so far as it discriminated against the use of the Polish language in political meetings. During the First World War he eventually took a clear-cut pro-Polish line, pointing out that the German nation had a cultural mission to fulfil in helping the Poles to re-establish their own nation-state. In 1917, he suggested that the Polish people should be given a liberal constitution which would allow them a very high degree of autonomy although under the protection of the Central Powers.

Weber's attitude to German war aims was also far from extremist, especially if compared with the gigantic expansionist plans harboured at the time in Germany in almost all political quarters. Weber objected outright to the annexation of any territories in the west—a position which at the time only a few people dared to take up in public; at best he was willing to consider the question of whether Germany should annex some small strips of territory because of their strategic importance. All he did hope for was that it might be possible to create an east-central European *cor-don sanitaire* consisting of a series of largely autonomous small

¹³ For a more detailed elaboration of this point see Mommsen, *Max Weber*, p. 75f.

slav nation-states under German hegemony, as a bulwark against Russia.

Yet it was not sheer abrogation of all expansionist ideas as such, which induced Weber to take up such a position. He maintained that a policy of wise moderation and restriction on the European continent was a necessary prerequisite for any future German 'world politics'. Greedy annexations of the kind supported by the bulk of German public opinion were bound to estrange Germany permanently from almost all the other European powers, and would make a successful foreign policy for the foreseeable future absolutely impossible. On the other hand he held the opinion that Germany had to be a power state, and that, to retain her position among the World Powers she had been obliged to run the risk of a European war: 'We had to be a power state, and had to take the risk of this war, in order to have a voice in the decisions about the future of the globe.'¹⁴ It was also Germany's duty to do all in her power to fight the war with all the means at her disposal, since her role as a world power was at stake and with it the position of the German culture in the world, and to some degree that of smaller European nations—the Swiss, the Dutch, the Swedes, for example—as well. Though Weber was much more realistic in his appraisal of Germany's prospects of winning the war than most of his German contemporaries, he clearly did not want her to give in. However, he was sincerely in favour of a negotiated peace, and—although he had made it a rule for himself to keep clear of direct political entanglement, he supported the *Deutscher Nationalausschuss*, a formally independent propaganda organization which had been secretly organized by the government in the summer of 1916, in order to prepare public opinion for the impending German peace move which was eventually made on 12 December of the same year.¹⁵ On the other hand, he strongly objected to the so-called 'July Resolution' of the German Reichstag of July

¹⁴ *PS*, p. 174.

¹⁵ For Weber's activity on behalf of the *Deutsche Nationalausschuss* see Wolfgang Mommsen, in Stammer (ed.), *Max Weber and Sociology Today*, Oxford, 1971, p. 112, and, in a somewhat wider context, Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks*, Köln, 1971, pp. 503ff.

1917, for he assumed that this would only weaken Germany's war efforts, while being useless in bringing about an early peace.

From the end of 1917, Weber showed growing concern about the course of events, and the likely outcome of the war. He was particularly worried about the decision to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare which he had done so much to thwart, since the entrance of the United States into the war seemed to him to put an end to all hopes for a negotiated peace. He also took exception to the peace of Brest Litovsk by which the chances of winning the smaller Slav nations in the east over to the German side had been gambled away, and with it the chance of preparing the way for a general peace by concluding a reasonable peace in the East. He later remarked repeatedly that the German nation paid bitterly for these two gigantic acts of folly, which had amounted to 'challenging destiny'.

It is highly typical of Weber's political character that in the hour of defeat—in spite of his severe objections to the policies of Imperial Germany during the war—he nonetheless declined to join the huge wave of pacifism which swept the country, partly as a response to Wilson's 'Fourteen Points'. On the contrary, he considered it to be the duty of every honest German to behave with 'national dignity'. In fact, his own nationalist feelings attained a second peak, and he even dared defend Ludendorff who, rightly or wrongly, was universally believed to be chiefly responsible for the military as well as the political disaster which had beset Germany.

Max Weber was furious about the revolutionary movement mainly for nationalist reasons. In his view the disastrous outcome of the preliminary peace negotiations was a direct result of the revolution, for it had made a national *levée en masse* impossible, and hence it had hopelessly weakened the German negotiating position from the very start. He went so far as to charge the revolutionaries with the grave responsibility of having made Germany defenceless against the Poles in open defiance of the Government, in order to defend the East German territories if necessary by means of nationalist guerrilla warfare against foreign intruders. Weber would have nothing to do with the pacifist trends of the day. As late as spring 1920, in his famous public lecture 'Politics

as a Vocation', he defended the principles of power politics against the pacifist mood of the day.¹⁶

It is not easy to reconcile the record of Max Weber's actual attitude to nationalism and power politics with his theoretical findings on the same issues. Remarkably, despite his passionate involvement, Weber was capable of analysing these phenomena with an unusual degree of insight, particularly if the level of scholarly information attained about these topics at the time is taken into account.

It should be noted that Weber's notion that it would be little more than sentimental folly to assume that power could ever be eliminated as an essential ingredient of politics, is to be found throughout his political and sociological writings. Not only did he contend that power is the very essence of politics, but he went so far as to define political systems primarily in terms of power relationships. To Weber, almost any social relationship is, or can be interpreted as a display of power, however indirectly this may be done. 'Power', it would seem, is one of the ultimate categories of his political sociology; 'power' can be legitimized, and possibly held in check by a system of balances; it may also be made almost invisible by a system of normative rules and regulations which would normally guarantee an order of things such that a recourse to physical force is exceptional. Yet it cannot be disposed of altogether. The liberal, and, later on, the Marxist dream, that it might be possible to replace 'the rule of man over man by the administration of things'¹⁷ was in his opinion an altogether Utopian idea, and of doubtful value. Constant struggle or, in ordinary life, competition between men as well as between nations was a necessary prerequisite to any dynamics in society, and hence also to individual liberty. Pacifism as well as genuine Christian morality—as voiced amongst others by Tolstoy—Weber considered to be weak and feeble creeds; creeds not worthy of a self-confident personality. In this respect he sided with Machiavelli, although he by no means belittled the fundamental conflict between everyday and political ethics, as the Florentine thinker had done. It was the duty as well as the responsibility of the

¹⁶ *PS*, pp. 546ff.

¹⁷ Cf. below, p. 87.

politician to live with this conflict, even at the expense of the peace of his own soul.

Weber never envisaged any other world than his own, which was largely characterized by the rivalry of nation states. He came to believe that states organized on any other lines than that of nationality were not likely to survive for long, as the case of Austria-Hungary seemed to indicate. He pointed out that the state was nowadays inevitably associated with the idea of the nation, and if not, it lacked adequate stability. Weber therefore assumed that, for a long time to come at least, nation-states were likely to remain the quasi-natural units of political association and political struggle.

He was, however, fully aware of the fact that the term 'nation' was anything but unambiguous, and that it could mean many things to many men. After the turn of the century, he emancipated himself more and more from the somewhat racialist conception of the 'nation' which rather naïvely he had adhered to in his early years. He realized that ethnic homogeneity was by no means a suitable category to cope with the manifold problems connected with the national ideal; a common cultural heritage as well as conscious political decisions were much more important than ethnic factors. He occasionally pointed out that obviously racialist interpretations of nationality problems were not likely to succeed. There were all too many examples to the contrary, the most conspicuous example being the Alsatians who belonged to the German nation, both on ethnic and on linguistic grounds, but considered themselves nonetheless to be French citizens. He also noted that, although no less than four different ethnic groups lived in Switzerland, there existed a specific Swiss national idea.

On the other hand, his conviction that a common language was a factor of first-rate importance for a stable political system, was corroborated by the case of Austria-Hungary which showed many signs of gradual disintegration after 1916. Yet he now considered language less as an indication of the affiliation to a particular ethnic group, but rather as the most conspicuous element of a common cultural heritage. Within the frame of reference of a state-oriented conception of the nation, there gradually emerged an alternative concept which defined nation primarily

as the embodiment of the cultural values and traditions held in common by a particular people. On the other hand, the connexion between the 'nation' and the 'nation-state' as its power organization was never completely severed. Weber was convinced that no cultural community could survive for long without creating its own political organization—at least not in the case of larger nations. Conversely, however, the nation-state derives its *raison d'être*—that is to say its ideological legitimization—largely from the cultural values accepted and held in common by the respective national group.

On the basis of these observations Max Weber eventually came to believe that three major factors constitute a 'nation':

1. a common national language,
2. a common cultural heritage, and
3. a political organization which is endowed with sufficient military power and which is the carrier of a specific 'power prestige', that is to say which is believed to be capable of employing force against other states, if the need should arise, in defence of the honour of the nation.

These three factors are usually intimately connected, although with varying degrees of relative weight and importance. The factor of 'power' is by no means a mere technical element, for it confers a certain prestige or, as Weber puts it elsewhere, a certain 'pathos' on the nation as such: 'Time and again we find that the concept "nation" directs us to political power. Hence the concept seems to refer—if it refers at all to a uniform phenomenon—to a specific kind of pathos which is linked to an idea of a powerful community of people who share a common language, or religion, or common customs, or political memories; such a state may already exist or it may be desired.'¹⁸ On the other hand the legitimacy of the nation-state is usually derived from the high esteem in which a common cultural heritage is held, and hence it is closely linked with the destinies of the 'cultural community', as well as with its values: 'The significance of a "nation" is usually anchored in the superiority, or at least the irreplaceability, of the culture values that are to be preserved and developed only

¹⁸ *EaS*, Vol. 1, pp. 397f.

through the cultivation of the peculiarity of a group.'¹⁹ Furthermore the nation-state defends, and possibly expands, the sphere which is dominated by its own cultural community, against rival national cultures, and for this very reason the nation-state is considered by the educated classes in particular as a most worthy object of their endeavours.

About 1913, it did occur to Max Weber that things might well work the other way round—that is, the establishment of a powerful nation-state might well do harm to a viable national culture. He noted that the German victory in 1871 had not fostered the development of art and literature in the political centre of Germany, a statement which reminds us of Nietzsche's rather harsh saying that the foundation of the German Empire amounted to 'the extirpation of the German spirit in favour of the German Empire'.²⁰ Yet Weber did not follow this up by inquiring whether this insight might put his belief in the nation as an ultimate value into jeopardy.

It is worth noting that to Weber the display of some degree of political power was an essential element of the nation-state, even though he repeatedly pointed out that there were many nations which had no substantial 'power organization'.²¹ In the case of Switzerland, he believed the renunciation of a power status even to be the very core of the idea of Swiss nationality. It might seem that the power element existed in this particular case as, in mathematical terms, a 'negative', yet nonetheless as a substantial factor. Weber distinguished between 'power-states' on the one hand, and 'outwardly small nations' on the other, although he conceded that the latter also had to fulfil a specific mission in history. The small nation-states, however, could only survive, according to Weber, under either the virtual shield of protection of a 'Great Power' or by enjoying relative security from aggression through the balance of power within the European state system by which the aggressive energies of the great power states were mutually kept in check. It is only in this way that the smaller nation-states were able to enjoy a relative degree of politi-

¹⁹ *EaS*, Vol. 2, p. 925.

²⁰ *WuG*, Vol. 2, p. 530, note (*EaS*, Vol. 2, p. 926, note.)

²¹ Cf. *WuG*, Vol. 1, p. 244.

cal security, which was sometimes even given the form of the formal guarantee of their territorial integrity by the great powers.

Weber used a similar line of reasoning whenever he set out to justify the German war effort. Germany being in an altogether different position than the smaller European nations—such as, for instance, the Swiss or the Dutch or the Norwegians—had a duty to fight the First World War in order to have a say in the decisions on ‘the quality of the culture of the future’. She could not, with honour, allow the world to be divided up between the ‘reglements of Russian bureaucrats on the one hand, and the conventions of Anglo-Saxon society on the other, possibly with an infusion of Latin *raison*’.²² Germany as a ‘power state’ had to live up to her responsibilities, not only in regard to the survival of her own peculiar culture but also, although somewhat more indirectly, on behalf of the cultures of the small central European nation-states as well. In his opinion their existence depended to a considerable degree upon the existence of a strong German nation-state in the centre of Europe.

As far as the scanty sources allow, one may well conclude that Weber envisaged a post-war political order in Europe, as well as in the world at large, in which the Great Powers would once more be the backbone of world politics. They were all expected to act as virtual protectors of those smaller nation-states which were in no position to hold their own in an age of power politics and imperialism, but which had, on the other hand, to fulfil particular cultural duties. Weber’s admittedly vague remarks about the outlines of a possible post-war European order would seem to indicate that he expected that the German Empire would continue to dominate central and east-central Europe largely by indirect means, in the face of a re-emerging Russia on the one hand and the rising power of the United States on the other, while abstaining from all direct annexations.

It depends on one’s point of view whether this vision is described as an outright imperialist scheme, or as a rational assessment of the political potentialities of the time. Yet undoubtedly Weber’s political ideas about the future political order of Europe were much more moderate than those of most of his contem-

²² *PS*, p. 143.

poraries in Germany and to some degree even in the whole of the west. However strongly Weber felt about national issues—after having corrected his initial lapse as regards the Polish people—he never lost sight of the necessity to pay attention to the vital interests of other nations as well. His contention that a power state has obligations not only to its own population but also to other smaller nation-states of common cultural parentage, shows the same viewpoint, although he did not always keep clear of what nowadays would be called a veiled or ‘informal’ imperialism.

This change of attitude is also reflected in the development of Weber’s theoretical conception of imperialism. Until shortly before the war, no theoretical statements about the nature of modern imperialism can be found in Weber’s writings.²³ There are only a few scattered passages in his political writings which allow a reconstruction of his views about Imperialism as a socio-political phenomenon. In his violent imperialist statements of the late 1890s Weber stressed, in particular, the economic advantages of imperialist expansion, even though he always referred in the last resort to the national interest as such. Until 1908, and perhaps a little later, Weber held a position in some respects similar to that of Marxism, although it originated with mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois national economists like John Stuart Mill and David Ricardo. Weber assumed—just as John Stuart Mill had argued two generations before and as Rosa Luxemburg was to maintain a few years later—that the dynamics of capitalism depended, at least to some degree, on the continuous opening-up of virgin territories all over the globe, by which capitalist industrialism would constantly be supplied with fresh opportunities of exploitation. Weber appears to have expected that the process of economic growth was bound to gradually slow down, at least in the long run. Hence the tendency of the major industrial states to secure for themselves an exclusive sphere of economic activity, to the detriment of all the others, by excluding all foreign competition from those spheres of influence by high tariff walls would gain considerable momentum. It is probably primarily for this reason that Weber spoke up so violently in favour of German

²³ For a more detailed exposition of Weber’s imperialist views see W. J. Mommsen, *Max Weber*, pp. 76ff.

expansionism. He contended that Germany must do everything within her power to secure territories overseas, that is to say exclusive spheres of economic activity, while this was still possible—that is to say before the world was divided up into closed zones of economic control. Once the present period of international competition had come to an end, the dynamics of the economic system, the well-being of the masses of the population and, in the last resort, the degree of individual freedom as well, would all depend to a large degree on the size of the nation's colonial dependencies. For this very reason it appeared plausible for liberal individualists such as Weber to become ardent and passionate champions of imperialism.

Around 1911 Max Weber was obviously no longer such a pessimist about the future of the capitalist system, although he still believed that imperialism, rather than peaceful international trade and free economic exchange, would have its way at least in the foreseeable future.²⁴ Consequently there was no longer an over-whelming economic necessity for imperialist expansion at all costs. This allowed Weber to assess on a scholarly basis the factors which may stimulate expansionist policies, by means of a comparative analysis of imperialist phenomena throughout history which foreshadowed Schumpeter's famous essay on 'The Sociology of Imperialisms'. Although Weber did not develop a formal theory of imperialism, he assembled vital elements for it. He dealt at length with the various economic factors which might encourage imperialist politics. He pointed out that booty-capitalism, which was interested in the monopolistic exploitation of economic opportunities opened up in the course of imperialist annexations, was the most important and, at the same time, most common type of economic influence on imperialism. He went on to say that the exploitation of monopolistic opportunities is always more profitable than the pursuance of ordinary industrial enterprises oriented to peaceful exchange with trading partners in other nations. Weber attributed particular importance, however, to the interests of the producers of war machinery, and armament materials; they are, in his opinion, whatever the outcome, directly interested in expansionist policies.

²⁴ *WuG*, Vol. 2, p. 526 (*EaS*, Vol. 2, 919).

Weber did not think, however, that it would be possible to get rid of imperialism by abolishing capitalism altogether. On the contrary he argued that socialist systems were just as much inclined to exploit dependent territories as capitalist ones. Weber, as a matter of fact, went so far as to argue that the opportunities for monopolistic exploitation are the more numerous the more the public sector expands at the expense of the private sector of an economic system. For only the state can create monopolies, and the more it controls the economy, the more it does so. In other words: nationalization would only bring about an increase in the economic incentives for imperialist ventures, and lead to an intensification of imperialism. Hence competitive capitalism, in contrast to booty-capitalism, is implicitly exculpated from the charge of fostering imperialism, a line of reasoning that was taken up later by Schumpeter and Walt Whitman Rostow.

In fact, Weber did not believe that economic factors alone are sufficient to explain imperialist policies. To some degree he supported the traditional notion that 'power prestige' is an important factor in inducing great powers to pursue a consistent expansionist policy. This would seem to be in line with the interpretation of imperialism as a sort of intensified struggle between great powers, a conception which is essentially a transplantation of Ranke's conception of history, in which the Great Powers play the role of the prime movers in the European State System, onto imperialistic world politics. Yet Max Weber did not stop there. He demonstrated that this sort of 'power prestige' which, under modern conditions, was intimately associated with the complexity of emotional feelings which make up the idea of the nation, was conditioned by a variety of sociological factors. It is above all the intelligentsia which identifies itself with the idea of the nation, and which propagates it among the population at large. In doing so the intelligentsia is obviously motivated not only by idealistic convictions, but even more by massive material interests. For any expansion of the national culture increases their chances of profitable employment, and—what is infinitely more important—if the prestige of the national culture is enhanced by successful imperialist policies, their own social status is likely to be substantially elevated also.

In a wider sense the ruling classes, and in particular, the ruling élites, always gain substantially from successful imperialist operations. Max Weber comes close to the modern concept of 'social imperialism' as a manipulative strategy of ruling élites designed to defend their own privileged positions in the existing social system, and to forestall the imminent rise of the working classes to power. He points out that successful imperialist ventures usually lead to an enhancement of political prestige and hence of the positions of the ruling classes within the social system: 'Every successful policy of coercing other countries as a rule—or, at any rate, initially—also strengthens the domestic prestige and thereby the power and influence of those classes, status groups, and parties, under whose leadership success has been attained.'²⁵ It is for this very reason, according to Weber, that the working classes are usually opposed to imperialism, although their own economic position is usually improved by a policy of imperialist expansion, at least in comparison with the lot of their fellows in other, less successful countries.

In 1913, Max Weber assumed that the 'universal revival of "imperialist capitalism"', which has always been the normal form in which capitalist interests have influenced politics', and 'a revival of political drives for expansion' were again well under way.²⁶ It is noteworthy that in explaining this he listed all those factors which since then have become the stock-in-trade arguments of the various non-Marxist theories of imperialism. He emphasized the imperialist interests of certain sectors in capitalist economies without putting the blame on the capitalist system as such. He drew attention to the fact that the rivalries between the European Powers considerably intensified the struggle for territories and spheres of exclusive economic influence abroad. Yet even more important was his observation that since the prestige and the ambitions of the ruling classes were usually enhanced, or, at any rate, stabilized, by successful imperialist ventures, this was indeed a very powerful force behind the drive for imperialism. Last, but not least, Weber emphasized the particular role of the intelligentsia in promoting imperialism. For they are directly interested in

²⁵ *WuG*, Vol. 2, p. 527 (trans. by the author); cf. *EaS*, Vol. 2, p. 920.

²⁶ *WuG*, Vol. 1, p. 526 (*EaS*, Vol. 2, p. 919.)

any extension of the sphere of influence of their own national culture. It is to be regretted that Weber never did assemble these most important elements of a theory of imperialism into a coherent theory. Yet, even in this form, the debate on the nature of modern imperialism, which has gone on since then up to the present day, owes a great deal to his insight.

It may well be said that Weber, by rationally analysing the motives to be found behind imperialism, erected considerable barriers against his own imperialist passions. Yet he did not discard them. He was convinced that 'for the predictable future' everything pointed to a further growth of imperialist tendencies, and he saw no real alternative to it. Germany, in his opinion, could not afford to step aside, all the more so as a failure in the general scramble for territories and economic opportunities overseas was bound to be detrimental to the German economy. It may be pointed out, by the way, that Weber was hardly inclined to give preference on moral grounds to peaceful international exchange rather than to straightforward economic imperialism. He was in fact anything but an enthusiastic free trader. On the contrary, he stated bluntly that market-oriented trade with colonies or other dependent territories overseas was in principle not all that much different from exploitation by means of direct imperialist control. He pointed out that industrial societies normally draw most of their advantages from imperialism in form of payments and interest charges which fully comply with the rules of ordinary market-oriented capitalist business.

For Weber personally, economic considerations of this kind carried only limited weight after 1913. He supported imperialism now more and more on the grounds that without it an independent German national culture would, in the long run, stand little chance of survival in a world dominated by two or three Super Powers. His own position was very much in line with the cultural imperialism of the intelligentsia as classified in his own theory. In his opinion, imperialist struggle was the order of the day. It could not, and would not, be stopped in the foreseeable future, and hence it was futile, and even dishonourable, not to support the interests of one's own nation-state. Apart from that, Max Weber intensely disliked the idea of a well-ordered world in which

political struggle and economic competition would give way to a dubious system of universal peace guaranteed by the tyrannical rule of a Super Power. In this respect the fate of the Mediterranean culture was a discouraging example. In his essays on the decline of the Roman Empire he had found that by imposing a strict *pax romana* on the whole west Mediterranean culture, the Roman Empire had paved the way for its eventual ossification. Weber clearly did not like the idea that this might happen all over again.